Local Historian Publishes Book on Fairbury and the Coal Mines

By: Dale C. Maley
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Dale C. Maley, local Fairbury historian, recently completed a new book titled ***Coal Mining in Fairbury, Illinois.*** His new book took about four years to research. The book is 155 pages with 140 different illustrations.

Fairbury coal mining all began with the Marsh family. Father John and son Henry Marsh moved to Fairbury from Washington, Illinois, around 1859. John Marsh bought farm land adjacent to Fairbury and converted some of it to the Marsh Addition. They donated the land which is now Marsh Park in 1859.

Father and son then decided to try digging for coal west of Fairbury. At that time, the conventional wisdom was that coal in Illinois would only be found along the major rivers. They were successful around 1862, and discovered coal about 200 feet below the surface.

The Marsh's discovery of coal ignited a revolution with respect to coal mining in Illinois. New coal mines began to spring up all over Illinois. The coal mines created a population boom in Fairbury. The population went from 269 in 1860 to 2,505 in 1910. People from Europe moved to Fairbury to get a job in one of the coal mines.

Some very interesting items were found as a result of doing the research for this book. A 1914 mining ledger from one of the Fairbury coal mines was loaned to the author. The handwritten entries give the coal miner's names, how much coal they mined each day, and how much they were paid. The ledger also lists all the retail customer's names and how much they paid for their coal.

Three group photos of Fairbury coal miner's were found at the Echoes Museum. The museum also has an actual mining lamp used by a Fairbury coal miner.

Coal mining has always been a relatively hazardous occupation. A safety rule-of-thumb was found that after 1917, one death per 380,000 tons of coal mined was the normal fatality rate. About 1.7 million tons of coal were mined from Fairbury. Applying the safety rule-of-thumb, it was expected there would be four to five fatalities occur in Fairbury coal mines. Maley was able to find records for four fatalities in the Fairbury coal mines.

A hand-written copy of Henry Marsh's 1886 last will & testament was also found. Maley was able to decipher the old handwriting and type up a modern version of his will.

Maley was able to confirm that mules were used in the Fairbury coal mines to pull small train cars. Mules were used until they were replaced by electric motor driven cars.

Maley's new book is available as a Kindle e-book from Amazon. He has also printed and donated copies of this new book to the Dominy Memorial Library and Echoes Museum in Fairbury.